

Haruhi Theater Act II

Translated by Stratos

I doubt anyone remembers what happened last time so I think I'll give you a simple summary.

I'm not really sure what happened, but we suddenly arrived in a world out of some cheap fantasy RPG. Or more like we members of the SOS Brigade were sent here. Anyway, I'm not really sure how it happened, but we somehow we somehow went from a castle to a rescue mission for a kidnapped princess. Which was all fine and dandy, but thanks to Haruhi blindly barging forward, we somehow made it to the castle where the demon lord lived. A spell of mass destruction unwillingly cast by Asahina-san the mage probably blew the demon lord, prince, and princess to kingdom come. One could therefore conclude that we had failed our mission. This time we've been thrown into a galactic setting out of some cheap space opera. And before you could say "Jack Robinson," we were forced to accept a new set of orders without the slightest clue as to what the situation was. But as for the task before us, it was the same as last time. Bring back the kidnapped prince and princess—.

There you have it.

I can understand that you probably want to tell me that you have no idea what's going on. Why, you ask? Because I feel the same way. At any rate, that's just how it is so I'm hoping you can accept it.

While in the role-playing world last time, mystery lover Koizumi said that we might be in some kind of game. Brainiac Nagato mentioned that the most likely possibility would be that we were in simulated space. And a not very concerned Asahina-san apparently thought it was a theme park attraction. It was fairly obvious that Nagato had the most accurate explanation.

And also according to Nagato, conditions for termination have been set. Which would be the recovery of the prince and princess.

Honestly, the only difference is that we're in space instead of a pseudo medieval Europe and we're facing space pirates instead of a demon lord. At the same time, our own roles have shifted from that of legendary hero, bard, and company to something more futuristic. We are now Team Haruhi of the Galactic Regional Observation Conclave's Patrol Force. The name's so fishy they could probably smell the stench at the end of the galaxy. And accordingly, it would seem that I've become a member of a spaceship pilot crew.

Since after all, I'm sitting in a pilot chair gripping what could only be a control stick.

The screen before me was filled with non-twinkling stars. Nothing could convey our current situation more effectively than this sight. One of my childhood dreams was to go into space, but this feels like it was fulfilled a little too easily.

Really, how can we set out into space without any preparation at all? I can't find the words to express my remorse to those astronauts who go through endless training.

Of course, I can't even be sure if we're actually in space. It's far more likely that this is a dream in another sense so I wasn't exactly thrilled with my view of the sea of stars. It wasn't so much that I'd lost the innocence of youth, but rather that I was probably resigning myself to the situation.

"Come on, Kyon."

Haruhi said in a voice as bright as a clear summer day as she smacked my back.

"Let's murderize those space pirates and take back the hostages. Full speed ahead! Mach speed!"

When I turn my head, I'm forced to look at the spaceship's bridge or CIC or whatever this is.

While this is a spaceship, it really isn't that big. This control space is about as large as the literary clubroom. Haruhi sat in a chair on a slightly elevated seat near the rear. I should mention that attached to the seat is a plate with the word "Chief" engraved on it.

Haruhi's face was a picture of boundless cheer. And her rather colorful outfit showed off a generous amount of skin. My eyes can't help but notice the curves of her body. Shouldn't she at least be a little curious about why she's dressed like that?

Dressed in a costume out of some SF novel from the last century, Haruhi spoke.

"For now, head straight to the pirates' den. The rest will be simple. Barge on in—"

She drew what looked like a tin toy phaser from its holster.

"And blast everything with these. And while we're at it, we should take all the treasure they've gathered and return everything to their rightful owners. I'm sure they'll be grateful."

She said all this while waving the phaser around. Please don't accidentally pull the trigger. My reflexes aren't good enough to dodge a beam moving at the speed of light.

"Don't worry. I'm only aiming for space pirates."

Haruhi flipped the gun back into its holster.

"So Kyon, hurry up and get us to the pirates' den. Is this spaceship even moving? The scenery totally isn't changing."

According to the speedometer which for some unknown reason is analog, we're flying at maximum velocity. The scenery isn't changing because we're in outer space.

"Well, that's nice and all..."

I turn my head.

"Which way am I supposed to go? Where exactly is this space pirate den?"

"Beats me."

Haruhi replied without hesitation.

"I don't know. Yuki, do you know?"

The new focus of attention, Nagato slowly nodded wordlessly. Incidentally, Nagato was seated in a seat facing the side. Her role here seems to be that of some kind of radar operator.

"..."

Dressed in the same costume as Haruhi, Nagato fiddled with her console as she carefully chose her words.

"All-direction foe detection mode. Currently gathering data."

That was all she said.

"Make it quick. I want to finish this job pronto and do some sightseeing."

Haruhi reclined her captain's seat and turned to the seat on the opposite side of Nagato.

"Mikuru-chan, give me tea."

"Ah, yes."

Asahina-san stood up in yet another flimsy costume. She disappeared behind an automatic door in the back before shortly returning with a tray holding teacups for all of us. I was expecting some kind of tube to be involved, but it appears that gravity exists in this spaceship so we can drink our tea normally. Seriously, I'd love to know how that works.

"Here's your tea. Um, the teabag said that it was made on the planet Dongara. It had a marvelous taste when I tried it."

I'm glad that she's happy and all, but Asahina-san is supposed to be the communications officer on this ship. Still, serving tea seems like the more appropriate role for her, so I just relax and stop caring.

"While drinking tea is a splendid thing..."

Koizumi spoils our elegant teatime.

"We must first determine our present position before we can head for our destination. The universe is a vast place."

Koizumi's sitting right next to me, but I'm doing all I can to do avoid looking at him. That would be because he is dressed in the same pilot suit as I am, and looking at him only serves to deepen the doubts I'm feeling about why I'm dressed like this.

Koizumi removed the teacup, which happened to be identical to the ones in the clubroom, from his lips and indicated the console by the co-pilot's seat.

"While I was fiddling with the controls, a star chart of the universe appeared. According to the chart, we are currently in the border regions of an interstellar nation known as the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire."

Come to think of it, that emperor or whatever with the really familiar voice said something along those lines.

"Heh..."

Haruhi said as she sipped her tea.

"So? Where's the pirates' den?"

"We really don't know."

Koizumi operated the panel with one hand to bring up a number of display windows.

"Not only are there an abnormally high number of nations, practically no unexplored areas remain. As for a region where an organized band of pirates could hide... I ran a query for Sargasso Space, but nothing's been found at this point."

Koizumi reported this in a rather pleasant mood. I have no idea what he finds amusing about the situation, but as far as I can tell, this is no time to be leisurely drinking tea. When will this dream/virtual reality game/incomprehensible situation come to an end?

"Of course, once we have accomplished the requested task."

Koizumi flashes a smile at me as he continues his explanation.

"I suppose we should start by learning the history of this universe. The person who has requested our help would be the emperor of the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire. As you may have guessed from the "fifth" in the name, there are other Galactic Empires in this universe."

As Koizumi's fingers moved, the front screen switched to a star map. Numerous patches of varying color rise.

"It appears that in the beginning, one empire reigned over all regions. After going through divisions and revolutions, they arrived at this current picture. The data states that the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire is a relatively new nation. Other nations include the United Galactic Conquest Empire, the Orthodox Galactic Empire Exiled Administration, the Galactic Empire Federation, the Holy Galactic Empire, the True Galactic Empire, the True Galactic Empire Border Regions, the Galactic Empire Independent United Constitution, and...

"Enough already."

I cut him off.

"I can see that this world is loaded with galactic empires. So where are the pirates?"

"Yes, about that. According to the information on the computer on this ship, they may not necessarily be pirates."

"Heh..."

Haruhi didn't look particularly interested.

"What does that mean?"

"A large number of nations are proclaiming themselves to be the mainstream conservative Galactic Empire which has led to territorial squabbling. The computer indicates that there is a possibility that they may be pirates only in name and are actually attached to one of the military units from another nation. A form of covert military operation."

"Hmm?"

I couldn't tell if she understood what he was saying or not. Haruhi set down her empty teacup.

"So basically, another nation was involved with these pirates, right? The dopey prince and princess weren't kidnapped by pirates, but by another nation?"

"It is possible. If that is the case, we will have to tread lightly."

Koizumi spread his arms wide.

"We are the Galactic Patrol. It is not our role to interfere in conflicts between nations. While it may be our duty to regulate pirates, we are limited to restricted intervention when opposing governments are involved."

I see. So they have rules about this, huh?

I sigh.

"Then what do we do? Should we just float around in space?"

"We're hunting down those pirates, of course. And I haven't forgotten about

Haruhi said cheerfully.

"It doesn't matter which fleet they're with. Anybody who commits piracy can be considered a pirate. We just have to zip right on in and then zip right back out. The king probably won't have any complaints as long as the prince and princess are safe."

It's kind of odd that this empire's ruled by a king. Shouldn't he be called an emperor?

"That's good and all..."

I make my report.

"Let's get back to the original topic. Tell me where we're supposed to go. Those pirates are nowhere to be seen."

Haruhi paused as if deep in thought. She apparently then came some kind of decision as she drew out her laser pistol and aimed it at the screen after tinkering with the scale.

"Around here."

The light from her pistol shines on the star chart like a laser pointer. Haruhi gestured as she continued.

"Might as well go with intuition here. I was thinking... I've got a hunch that the universe isn't really as big as it looks. Won't we run into them eventually if we just fly around? We can just grab anyone who looks suspicious and squeeze some info out of them."

Will it really be that easy?

"Why wouldn't it?"

Koizumi input the coordinates Haruhi had indicated into the computer and smiled at me.

"I believe that we have not been dealt a particularly difficult scenario. Success has already been established in the premise. If we wait long enough, the opposition should make a move. Wasn't that what happened last time?"

"Guess so."

I readjusted my grip on the control stick and nodded grudgingly.

I remember how the person we were supposed to look for came to us while we were lounging around in the fantasy world. A number of events were glossed over. In fact, destroying the demon lord's castle was about the only thing we accomplished. Kind of like we jumped straight from the opening to the ending. The problem was that we even skipped over the last boss fight. We can't make that same mistake again. Or we'll get stuck in another one of these acid trips. We need to at least come face to face with the last boss.

"Kyon, crank up the hyper drive. Schismatrix, full speed ahead!"

Haruhi made up her own name for the spaceship, and I stood there and followed her orders.

After all, Haruhi's intuition might as well be premonition. The fact is that whenever we go where she tells us to go, something pops up whether or not we want it. This has already been drilled into me so deeply that I won't be able to forget it after death.

And so, I maneuvered the control stick in preparation for the jump. Oddly enough, I already knew how to procedure so everything went smoothly. Like how you can play games to a certain degree without looking at an instruction manual? Something like that.

"Schismatrix, jumping to hyperspace."

I droned rather despondently. And the spaceship with a pointlessly cyberpunkish name jumped into hyperspace.

Whew. The scenery flashing by on the screen is going to make me sick. Like a swirl of wavy neon lights. Or that weird emblem on the SOS Brigade website. In any case, we're definitely traveling through hyperspace. I was appreciating how closely this resembled hyperspace in old cartoons when...

"Would you like some more tea?"

Asahina-san came over with a ceramic pot in one hand and a smile on her face.

She looked so casual about the whole thing that I had to wonder if in the future, faster-than-light travel was like taking the bus. But I doubt it. I was able to experience a moment's reprieve as I gratefully accepted a refill from Asahina-san as though we were back in the clubroom.

Well, what will we find once we reach our destination?

Haruhi looked like she was itching to leap into a firefight of lasers. Nagato sat silently looking like she was emitting radar waves from her body. Koizumi looked like he was just playing a game. Asahina-san looked like she completely didn't understand our situation. And myself. The SOS Brigade quintet was riding this spaceship into humanity's final frontier. Straight to the pirates' den—.

—And, an hour later.

Well, I wasn't actually expecting to reach the pirates' den so easily when we haven't even seen the pirates before.

I juked the control stick before voicing my query.

"What's going on here?"

"As you can see. It would appear that we've been captured."

Koizumi shrugged.

"We have been snared by a tractor beam. We are unable to move."

Having faithfully followed Captain Haruhi's orders, we crew members of the Schismatrix found ourselves reverting from hyperspace without a hint of confusion.

In that instant, the display screen was covered by an ocean of stars, and a massive fleet large enough to blot out those stars.

I can't even begin to guess how many ships there are. An array of pointed ships of all sizes stretches as far as the eye can see.

Since this was the sight which greeted us immediately upon returning to normal space, my response, naturally, was one of shock. However, the unidentified fleet was also in shock. A large number of ships ricocheted off of one another like bumper cars resulting in a period of confusion. Almost as if on cue, their bows turned toward us and fired a strange-colored beam. And just like that, the Schismatrix lost its mobility, and a warning siren began wailing from the computer. It's still going.

"That's loud."

Haruhi creased her brow as she munched on what looked like a space chocolate banana.

"Stop this weird noise. And call up whoever's in charge of that fleet. Who are these guys anyway? They don't look like they're pirates."

We'd be in some big trouble if these were pirates. It would be a tiny, little patrol ship versus a full-fledged battle ready fleet. How could we possibly win? Does Asahina-san's crazy magic work in a vacuum?

As the warning siren wailed like a synthesizer, Asahina-san, serving as the communications officer, hastily fiddled with her touch panel. "Um, um. What am I supposed to do?"

All she could do was flounder around. Guess that's expected. She's not a mage this time.

"The alarm indicates that we have been locked on to," Koizumi said calmly. I believe that they will soon open a line of communications. For they must also find our appearance to be baffling."

Nagato was the one who stopped the gas detector-sounding alarm. Of course, all she did was press a button on her console. Does she just have a natural affinity with this ship? Either way, the machine shut up.

At about the same time, a familiar-looking geezer popped up on the large screen before us. Only the upper half of body was displayed. It was instantly apparent that we were wearing some sort of military uniform.

"We protest this very strongly."

The geezer had a pretty big scowl on his face.

"You could have caused a serious accident here. If you had reverted from hyperspace onto our fleet, there would have been a massive nuclear explosion!"

I nodded as I realized where I knew him from. The geezer was eerily identical to the weirdo who called himself the forest sage.

"What business does the Galactic Regional Observation Conclave have here? There shouldn't be any vital planets in this sector."

Hmm? Doesn't this geezer look awfully nervous? I can tell that he finds us a nuisance, but it's plain as day that something else is going on here.

Haruhi listened in silence because she was in the middle of eating her chocolate banana. Once she finished eating...

"What about you guys? Identify yourselves before you start questioning us."

Haruhi smiles in that unique way of hers.

"Everybody's clear on the fact that we're a patrol unit, right? So, who are you guys?"

"We are the Neo Orthodox Galactic Empire's Third Fleet. I am Fleet Commander—"

She didn't bother waiting for him to give his name.

"Then it's our time to ask questions. What are you doing here? You have an awful lot of ships."

Faced with Haruhi's cross-examination, the geezer quickly averted his eyes.

"...Military exercises. Now that you know, leave at once."

If I could tell that something was wrong, Haruhi probably could, too. And naturally...

"Sounds fishy. You shouldn't have anything to hide if you're just playing war games. Your attitude's changed. Koizumi-kun, where are we?"

Koizumi looked up from his instrument panel. "We are near the border between the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire and the Neo Orthodox Galactic Empire. Our current position is within the territory of the latter. We are removed from official shipping routes which would be satisfactory for exercises..."

If anyone ever put him in a narrator role, he'd make the world's biggest girly man.

"But it's on too large a scale. And this fleet is advancing on a roundabout route towards our client, the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire. Incidentally, I took a glimpse at the data on the computer, and I was unable to confirm any scheduled military exercises in this area at this time. At the very least, none that the Galactic Regional Observation Conclave is aware of."

"A-ha."

Haruhi's peerless powers of intuition had apparently arrived at an answer.

"You're not practicing for war. You're planning on the actual thing, aren't you? Without even declaring war first."

The fleet commander geezer on the screen sputtered indignantly.

"How dare you make such baseless accusations!? Even if that were the case, the Galactic Patrol Force has no authority to interfere in domestic affairs."

"That may be true," said Haruhi, "but it doesn't change the fact that we've seen you now, does it? It wouldn't be particularly strange if we happened to let it slip to the other nation that you're planning on invading. In fact, I'm just dying to tell them."

"Th-That would be inconvenient... No, wait. Wait."

The geezer waved his arms frantically.

It would appear that we had jumped into the middle of a fleet in the process of conducting a sneak attack. Looks like we've just gotten ourselves in some more trouble.

"Well, it doesn't matter."

I have no idea what she's talking about, but Haruhi grinned like a cat.

"We're only interested in the space pirates. I think war's dumb and all, but I'll let this slide."

The old fleet commander clutched his chest a little overdramatically. However...

"On one condition."

Haruhi leaned over from her captain's chair.

"Can you tell us where the pirates' stronghold is? We're chasing them."

"Pirates, is it? Hmm, very well. We'll give you your information as quickly as we can."

The geezer sure was courteous. He must have been really happy about the opportunity to get rid of us.

"There are a large number of different pirate bands. Which merchant group was attacked? The largest and most powerful band in this region would be Captain Beyond's Underground Pirates."

"Let's see, I think they were kidnappers. Koizumi-kun, remind me who we're dealing with here."

"An unknown group."

Koizumi seemed amused for some reason as he looked at the geezer.

"These pirates kidnapped the prince and princess of the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire."

"Yeah, them."

Haruhi jabbed her finger at the screen with a snap.

"Those pirates. Do you know where we might be able to run into them?"

"Uh..."

The old commander's face had frozen stiff at some point. For someone so high up in the chain of command, this geezer really sucks at hiding his emotions.

"I haven't the slightest. That's news to me."

"You're lying."

If you can't trick me, you're not going to be tricking Haruhi.

"One look at your face tells me that you know what I'm talking about. So like, why'd you play dumb immediately?"

Haruhi's smile looked innocent, but I can tell that it's anything but. I've probably said this before, but her intuition is as sharp as the point of a Japanese sword.

"A-ha. I see how it is now."

Haruhi said smugly like she had already won.

"You guys are the kidnappers. You disguised a military vessel as a pirate ship. As for why you kidnapped the prince and princess of another nation... Ah, I get it. An excuse for your war, right? You're probably going to say that you're invading the Fifth whatever Empire in the name of the prince and princess. The story is that they escaped to your nation and intend to rebel against their parents."

The poor geezer was unable to escape Haruhi's challenging gaze.

"I figured it was something like that when I heard about all these Galactic Empires. Saying that space pirates did it sounded too ambiguous."

"Mmm..."

The commander was beginning to perspire heavily. Looks like she hit it on the nose.

"What an amazing coincidence. We just happen to run into the guilty fleet!"

She sure looks like she's feeling lucky. If this really were just a coincidence, I'd have to agree that it was amazing.

"Saves us a lot of time."

Haruhi didn't look all that surprised.

"In that case, we're done talking. Well, hurry up and hand over the prince and princess. We have to return them to their parents."

"I cannot do that."

The fleet commander geezer had looked like a frog being processed into oil up until this point, but he finally grew a spine.

"If you've figured that much out, we don't have a choice. I cannot allow you people to leave, much less hand over the prince and princess. We'll need you to keep quiet until our operations have concluded."

After the sudden confession to the crime, the geezer faded off the screen.

Hey, now. Don't tell me they're going to sink us to keep us from blabbing. And Haruhi wasn't much help. What's the point in telling them everything you're thinking? Shouldn't you have pretended not to know once you realized the truth?

And as I was greatly concerned about our future...

"Oh?"

The Schismatrix suddenly jerked forward. Just to clarify things, I didn't touch the controls. It moved on its own. What's going on here?

"It's a tractor beam. That battleship is pulling us in. They probably intend to restrain us."

Koizumi answered calmly. And like he said, our spacecraft was headed towards a gigantic futuristic-looking spaceship, and a hatch near the bottom of that ship was opening.

"So that's their flagship," Koizumi noted. "They're going to trap us in here until the war begins."

We don't need you to spell it out for us. Can't somebody do something about this?

"Actually, this may be our chance."

Koizumi brushed his fingers over his lips.

"Our objective is to recover the two kidnappees. They should be locked up somewhere in this fleet. Thus, we will now be able move about naturally. The problem is—"

Koizumi chuckled and looked at Nagato.

"We do not know where the prince and princess are being held, but I'm sure that can be taken care of. Some investigation should tell us the answer."

"..."

Nagato's lips remained pursed as she stared at her monitor. Nagato's the radar operator on this ship, but as far as I'm concerned, Nagato would probably be a lot more useful than all the instrument panels at her station. In the fantasy world, she served as a thief. However, we are now in what you could call Nagato's natural habitat, outer space. It couldn't hurt to expect good things.

And you-know-who apparently couldn't hold back her baseless expectations either.

"I was thinking that we'd have to drop by lots of star systems and gather information."

Haruhi was going through a cycle of drawing her laser pistol from its holster and then replacing it.

"It was actually quite simple. Just as I expected, yep. I've come up with a good plan."

I already knew her plan. Regardless of the situation, Haruhi just wanted to shoot something. And if she wants to shoot something, that automatically means that I'll have to join in... Oh, boy. This might make blowing away the demon lord's castle from the outside look like a piece of cake.

I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the approaching battleship with a sigh.

"I feel like I've turned into Pinocchio."

And so, the Schismatrix infiltrated the enemy ship. What a convenient twist. And it's even worse when you realize this was probably the correct solution. I have a feeling that it would have made a lot more sense if we had been sent gallivanting around the universe, but this abrupt turn of events is a lot more fitting when you're dealing with the anything but patient Haruhi. Well, at least this beats taking on the last boss at level one.

Well, now. I'm pretty sure you've already figured it out, but here's how Haruhi's plan basically went.

"We've successfully infiltrated their flagship. The rest is simple. We'll dash straight to the bridge and seize control. Then we tie up that old geezer and force him to release the prince and princess. They can still fight their war without those two. And we'll probably get to shoot something."

If her plan actually works, this was way too easy.

I peered out the window of our spaceship that was currently confined within the gigantic battleship. From what I could see, we appeared to be in a docking bay for small spaceships. There are rows of shuttles and communication vessels. Like a fancy, expensive parking lot with security guards.

Unlike the other ships, ours happened to be surrounded by a number of soldiers (who looked eerily similar to those whatever-troopers from that SF blockbuster movie) holding laser rifles (I'm guessing).

"Hey, Haruhi."

I turned to Haruhi who was gripping her laser pistol while attempting to prop up her seat.

"If we head out now, it'll be like walking into a wasps' nest. We'll all be covered with laser burns before we make it to the geezer."

"We can just dodge those with some guts."

I'm sure that I've mentioned this before, but I am by no means agile enough to projectiles moving at light speed.

"Th-Th-That's right!"

Asahina-san spoke for the first time in a while. In a trembling voice.

"I-It's dangerous. We should sit still and drink tea instead..."

"No way."

Haruhi instantly rejected Asahina-san's wonderful idea.

"That wouldn't be any fun. Understood? We, the Galactic Patrol, fight for justice. We must strike down evil where it stands. Kidnappers who have imprisoned us cannot be forgiven."

Oddly enough, Haruhi looked like she was having fun as she said that. Her facial expression doesn't match what she's saying. She probably just wants to rampage around.

"In any case, please wait one moment.

Koizumi had moved next to Nagato at some point. "Nagato-san is currently conducting a search. For the location of the prince and princess, that is."

When I looked, Nagato was deliberately moving her fingers across the panel at her console. I have no idea how you're supposed to use the thing, but small letters were scrolling rapidly across the glass-like display. Eventually...

"Found them."

Nagato murmured as her fingers came to a stop. The scrolling text also came to a halt.

"What were you looking at?" asked Haruhi.

"The crew list," said Koizumi. I asked Nagato-san to hack into the ship's computer. As expected, it was a simple task for her."

He didn't look too happy about it.

"Her efforts revealed a great deal. A majority of the crew members are with the military. And it just so happens that accommodations were made for two extra crew members. This is all speculation, but I never would have expected them to be on the same ship as us."

Koizumi then turned to look at Haruhi and me.

"The prince and princess are imprisoned on this ship. Perhaps they're receiving special treatment on account of their royal status. They're being kept under guard in a respectable room."

Another coincidence. Nah. Maybe the fleet commander geezer happens to be a moron? You normally wouldn't expect to be put on the same ship as the hostages.

As I sat bemused, Nagato must have done something, a blueprint of the battleship appeared on the screen. A somehow familiar-looking wire frame with a location marked by a blinking light.

"The prince and princess are in this room."

Another blinking light appeared.

"This is our present location. The lower hangar. Their room is much closer than the bridge. What shall we do?"

"Yeah..."

Haruhi pondered for a moment.

"Would it be better to make off with the hostages or take over this ship?"

I have a feeling that they'll be equally difficult. And though I may occasionally be lead to forget, my capabilities pale in comparison to yours.

Even if we clear the first stage, getting rid of all the soldiers surrounding the Schismatrix, we'd have to somehow make it to where the prince and princess are and then come all the way back. And if we could take over the ship, our lack of numbers means that it would take a while before they surrender. Neither idea sounds too great.

"Then we choose the third option."

Koizumi said with a scheming smile.

"Since we've already hacked into their system, we should use this advantage effectively. As much as we can."

Good thing Nagato's got skills. Though I somewhat doubt that the network security system for this ship is feeling helpful. Aren't we in the distant future? Should people in this age even recognize the word computer? And actually, what language are we speaking right now? Not that there's any point in thinking about it.

Koizumi smiled calmly.

"The purpose of this fleet is for launching a surprise invasion on other nations. I would assume that they've taken extreme cares to avoid detection. Such as jamming electromagnetic waves and communications. In that case, we just need someone to discover them."

Koizumi gestured towards the galactic map at his seat with one hand.

"Fortunately, our destination, the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire is located nearby. If we create a large disturbance, we will soon be discovered. Once a fleet assembled for a sneak attack has lost the element of surprise, it is rendered ineffective. There will also be chaos inside the ship. If we utilize that opportunity, rescuing the prince and princess may become a simple matter."

"Then we'll do that."

Haruhi sounded like some old incompetent commander blindly following the schemes of a corrupt general.

"Yuki, I'm counting on you."

Nagato slowly nodded and began working at her console for the system way beyond my comprehension.

And then she softly spoke.

"ECM activated on all ships."

The fleet numbering tens of thousands released jamming waves in unison, and despite the fact that there was nothing for them to jam, the resulting effect was tremendous.

Dong! There is a dull sound as the cockpit floor begins to shake.

"Big mess."

I sighed as I looked around the hangar.

A number of twirling red spotlights which had popped out of nowhere illuminated the numerous patrol ships, and a warning siren sounded in declaration of Level 1 Battle Stations.

Whoa. It just shook again. Somebody landed a hit.

At this moment, our Schismatrix is sitting in the belly of the flagship of the Neo Orthodox Galactic Empire's fleet which, while being bombarded by electronic waves courtesy of Nagato, is engaged in battle with a patrol fleet from the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire which had hastily arrived—and that's the current situation.

Nagato had hacked into their communications and was relaying information to us.

"Reinforcements confirmed. Progress report in five minutes."

Nagato impassively delivered updates as she watched the text scroll across her monitor. Haruhi rolled up her sleeves.

"Okay. This is our chance. Let's get this done while they're confused. Plus, the guards all went off somewhere else."

As far as the hangar was concerned, the soldiers surrounding the Schismatrix had frantically run off to some other place while people resembling maintenance crew members raced back and forth. I doubt such a perfect opportunity will come again. Have we gotten ourselves on the correct route to clearing the game?

"Make sure you remember the path to the room where the prince and princess are."

Haruhi, standing erect as a statue, spent a few seconds staring at the blueprints on the screen as she tightly gripped her laser pistol in one hand.

"Then, let's go."

I would have preferred to just stay here, but that wasn't an option. We all drew our laser pistols (Or couldn't we call them something else? Like blasters or something?) and followed Haruhi through the spaceship's airlock and jumped down into the hangar.

"A-hya!"

Asahina-san makes a rough landing as Koizumi comes to her aid. The lovely and glamorous Asahina-san managed to drop her blaster (I'll use this name since it sounds cooler.) and the person who happened to be closest, Haruhi, picked it up.

"Everyone, set your guns to paralyze. Turn the switch to where it says P. Even if they are kidnappers, I wouldn't feel too good about injuring people who aren't pirates."

Why does she know how to use a gun? And now I can't even call it a blaster. I have to change the name to paralyze gun.

Haruhi handed Asahina-san her P-gun.

"Come on. This way!"

After confirming that everyone was following her orders, Haruhi took off running. As I watch her hair wave behind her, I can almost forget that we're in outer space right now. Are we really on a space ship? I'm getting this feeling that the human race is still stuck on the moon and we're on some huge set. Well, given our current situation, we have no choice but to charge forward. And what really matters is that Haruhi's doing exactly that.

The five of us rushed through the giant door leading inside the ship. When Haruhi saw the remaining soldiers point their laser rifles at us, Haruhi immediately opened fire with her P-gun, knocking the soldiers unconscious and leaving us to run over their still bodies. We headed straight for the captured prince and princess—.

We made it.

Credit would go to Nagato's memory and sense of direction over anything Haruhi did. We managed to run straight through the complex maze of corridors inside the ship. As we climbed stairs, rode elevators, and turned corners, we would find ourselves engaged in firefights with soldiers and shoot them all down. I have no idea where we are right now though. All I know is that we're in front of a cabin.

"Stand back!"

Haruhi yelled out before flipping her laser pistol to infrared mode and firing away at the metal door. As the door fell apart into multiple pieces, I glimpsed two shadows standing on the other side.

Given the circumstances, I can't fault them for looking surprised, but the two dazed people staring at us don't look quite human.

Haruhi barged through what used to be a door.

"Are you two the prince and princess of that something galactic empire? Don't worry. We're here to rescue you."

They were supposed to be a prince and princess, but they didn't particularly look like royalty. More like your run-off-the-mill brother and sister. Their clothes are futuristic, but they look to be relatively ordinary.

Plus, maybe because of the shock or something, their faces don't exactly look refined or dignified. Makes me wonder if we got the right people.

And while I was deep in thought, Haruhi had already grabbed them by their arms. "Pull out! Time to withdraw! We'll return to the Schismatrix, blow up the hatch and get out of here. Our business here is done."

Exhibiting her usual overwhelming intensity, Haruhi dashes into the hallway with the two VIPs in tow. Naturally, we follow close behind. Maybe we shouldn't.

Even if the ship is currently running full battle stations, it's not like every crew member has a station to go to, so troopers would periodically show up like grunt enemies, get hit a few times by Nagato's pinpoint shooting, and fall to the floor paralyzed.

As we went back the way we came, we somehow made it back to our patrol ship. It goes without saying that Asahina-san spent the whole time tagging along. When you consider how she isn't really equipped for pitched battles, it was a mistake to put her in this role in the first place. A medical officer would have made a lot more sense.

"Kyon, launch the ship."

Upon returning to the ship, Haruhi had the prince and princess stand next to her captain's seat while she got to sit down.

"All cannons on standby! Target the wall in front of us!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am!"

Koizumi, reassigned from co-pilot to gunner, skillfully lined up the crosshairs and once Haruhi went...

"Fire!"

...he pulled the trigger.

Some kind of particle beam or photon torpedo shot out of the front end of the Schismatrix and blew up the hull of the battleship with a flashy explosion. As air goes rushing through the sizable hole, I can see shining lights on the other side. However, the lights do not represent stars, but exploding spaceships in the distance. I've only ever seen this happen in the movies, but I don't exactly have time to enjoy the sight from the pilot's sight. This isn't the time to be getting sidetracked. I pilot the Schismatrix per Haruhi's orders and escape from the flagship at full speed.

The Schismatrix weaves through the chaotic mess of spaceships like a small fish. We have two sides recklessly firing colored beams at each other which has got me in a cold sweat. This doesn't feel real at all. I flew the ship on pure gut and reflex as our ship flew towards that crazy space.

"Mikuru-chan, open a line of communications. To our allies."

Haruhi issued orders that could actually come from a real captain, and Asahina-san unwaveringly followed them. Like how I somehow knew how to fly a spaceship, she apparently somehow knew how to operate communications. Pretty odd if you think about it, but then again, not really. Anything goes in this place.

"Can you hear us, Team Haruhi of the Galactic Regional Observation Conclave's Patrol Force?"

A familiar old geezer's voice came over the speaker. It's the guy who looks like the King of Diamonds.

"This is the Fifth Galactic Independent Empire. I am the Emperor."

"We saved your two kids."

Haruhi said rather triumphantly.

"That should do it, right?"

"I thank you. Your may name your reward. However, we are currently engaged in battle. I am occupied with directing this battle. I would ask you to move to a safe location. We will pick up the prince and princess shortly."

The communication channel cut off with a pop. That was a little quick. Not that I expected him to be shedding tears of gratitude.

"That should be the end of that, right?"

I said to Koizumi. Except there's really no reason for me to talk to Koizumi, so halfway through, I turned to Nagato.

"..."

Nagato, who had been sitting in the radar operator's chair, is walking towards the prince and princess standing next to the captain's seat. What's this? The prince and princess don't react.

Nagato stared at the duo with those deep ocean eyes before extending one hand and touching the prince and then the princess.

An "Ah?" escapes from my mouth.

As soon as Nagato touched them, the two of them collapsed like their knees had shattered.

"Robots."

Nagato murmured as she looked at the two of them lying on the floor like plastic models with busted joints.

"Well, well..."

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders with a forced smile on his face.

"It appears that we were tricked into rescuing fakes. In this situation, either they anticipated a rescue mission and prepared dummies beforehand or the prince and princess never existed and were robot copies to begin with... It would appear that we made a mistake. We should have questioned how the two of them happened to be on the same ship as us. In retrospect, it would have been obscenely careless."

"So then, where are the real ones?"

Koizumi turned to the screen in response to Haruhi's question.

"If the invasion fleet kidnapped them and they weren't on the flagship, the obvious conclusion would be that they are being kept on a different ship. Though I do not know which ship that would be."

The sea of stars filled with colorful beams and there was another blooming flower of fire and smoke. The stellar fleet battle is getting intenser by the second. It looks like both sides have suffered heavy casualties. This is bad.

We were unable to do anything but watch as battleships were destroyed one by one.

"So?"

I said in a gloomy voice to nobody in particular.

"Maybe our client's side is unaware of the fact that their prince and princess may be on one of those ships. So they're still attacking the enemy ships?"

"It would appear so."

Koizumi nodded solemnly.

"It would be best if we informed them that the ones we rescued were fakes."

"Then we'd better do it fast. What if we're too late?"

"No, it may be a matter of perception, but I have a feeling that we are already too late."

So do I.

Pretty sure everyone else did, too.

Because—...

The scenery around us had begun to melt away. Like a widescreen movie fading out or poking a small hole in a black sheet of paper to watch as the sun is covered up. The only way you can describe this is a scene change.

Before I could even go, "What's going on?" I heard Nagato speak.

"Mission complete."

I didn't bother asking. Since this is the second time I've heard that.

"Ah—..."

We've done it again.

It looks like we've failed. The ship the real prince and princess were on had been sunk by allied forces, and the two of them had joined the sad depths of outer space. Please don't come back to haunt us.

"Penalty."

I sighed after Nagato's additional line.

Since this is the second time I've seen the scenery change like in a movie, it's not impressing me. The darkness of space gradually brightens. The word panorama pops into my mind for no real reason.

"..." is the reaction from Nagato, Koizumi, Asahina-san and myself.

We started in a fantasy world, and then found ourselves in a space opera, and now our third destination is—

A dry wind beats against my cheek. Dust clouds form around my boots. Boots? That's what they look like. And my brain's telling me that I can feel solid earth beneath my feet.

I looked up to see familiar looking, significantly dated buildings along with a clear blue sky.

"..."

Everybody is at a loss for words.

With a ten-gallon hat on my head, uh, how should I describe this? Anyway, the five of us are dressed like we came out of a Western and standing on an unpaved road.

"Oh, boy."

What else could I say?

A single action revolver replaced the laser pistol that had been in my holster. Koizumi and I are wearing retro-looking shirts and suspenders with sheriff badges pinned to our chests. Haruhi and Asahina-san are dressed similarly. Nagato looked just like a wandering gunman.

Which means that this is...

"Come on, everyone."

Haruhi announced with a grin on her face.

"Let's go. We'll save the rancher's son and daughter from those bandits with bounties on their heads. We're a band of evil-snuffing, brave sheriffs plus assistants."

Guess that's how it is here.

And so, our own Western movie—this might as well be a movie—began.

I don't know who to direct this question to, but I'm going to throw it out anyway.

"How long is this going to go on?"

"Probably until we've fulfilled our assigned task," Koizumi responded as he curiously played with the antique, peacemaker-looking gun. "Or perhaps until the person or persons who have brought us here grow tired of their game"

Koizumi twirled his pistol before thrusting it into his holster. Then he turned to Nagato with a smile on his face.

"I doubt this will go on forever. Why don't we enjoy this role-playing for now? It's a rare opportunity."

Haruhi, with a wide smile on her face, took the arm of Asahina-san, whose mouth and eyes were wide open, and turned to us.

"We need to find some horses first. There's no way we're going to walk through the desert. We should find a tavern for now—."

The setting resembles 19th century North America. The SOS Brigade heads for a typical-looking town.

Aiming to head into the wild frontier—.

To be continued...